Protecting our Historic Places in Uncertain Times

by
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Is your historic property prepared for a disaster?

"Probably not" was the conclusion by many who attended the two national conferences on *Balancing Public Safety and Protection of Historic Places* offered in 2002 by the Federal Preservation Institute, a program of the National Park Service. The first conference was held in January in Washington, D.C., and the other, co-sponsored by the General Services Administration, was in July in San Francisco. The purposes were to examine the broad range of issues regarding protection at historic places and to learn not only from persons in the historic preservation fields, but also from engineers, security experts, public officials, architects, and community planners. About 350 people attended the conferences, many of them learning for the first time about the concerns of preservationists for historic places and collections. Through a rapid succession of plenary and breakout sessions, preservationists and security professionals exchanged information and points of view. Presentations about the impact of 9/11, assassinations in public buildings, and natural disasters revealed that even places with an emergency plan often failed to practice it, failed to coordinate it with local disaster offices, and failed to have an off-site copy with information about the historic site and its contents. Speakers who are experts in security design and disaster planning also provided new information on the many techniques and common sense practices that can increase protection for the landscapes, buildings, collections, and places that we treasure as well as for visitors and employees. By the end, it was clear that securing people and property at our historic places must be part of the preservation agenda for the 21st century.

For a number of reasons, the issues in balancing public safety and protection of property are different for historic places than for other properties. Our historic buildings and landmarks are symbols of a unique, American way of life. Like all such symbols through the ages, they are targets for anyone who wants to destroy the values they stand for. We value the authenticity of these places. We want their physical appearance to reflect the passage of time; something that the historic centers of many European cities rebuilt after World War II have lost. We put a high value on the documents, books, art, and other records - irreplaceable evidence of our nation, our community, and ourselves - contained in many historic buildings and places. We must be concerned for the safety of visitors at historic places who at the moment of a disaster are caught in an unfamiliar environment and often far from home. Finding the balance to protecting those places identified with our heritage, in fact vessels of that heritage, while protecting visitors and workers is the challenge that these conferences addressed.

Principles

To focus the conference discussions, the Federal Preservation Institute worked with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to create the five *Principles for Development of Security Measures for Historic Places* [see insert box]. Adopted by the Council

members at their spring 2002 meeting, they are a guide for our planning and response to disasters. The Principles grow from the premise that protection of human life is paramount. But that is not enough. We also must protect places that embody history and values and that preserve our American ideals and the birthplaces of our dreams. The first Principle is that heritage protection is in the public interest. Officials responsible for public safety and security need to respect and consider the heritage which each community values. "Safety" and "security" should not be used as patent excuses or pretexts for insensitivity to heritage values or for failure to consider feasible ways to safeguard visitors at historic places.

The Principles also recognized that best practices for both public safety and heritage protection are evolving daily. Risk assessments are becoming more sophisticated and potential disaster impacts are more clearly identified. Moreover, common sense and technology are growing as we recognize the ineffectiveness of such practices as using moveable concrete barriers and placing guards inside, rather than outside, our buildings. Security practices and techniques must be on the cutting edge of the future in order to best protect ourselves and the places of our past.

Documentation of our heritage resources is stressed in the Principles. Historic places must have complete information about their landscape, archaeological sites, buildings, structures, and their collections, or have copies of that documentation at off-site locations. This is still rare. Complete survey information and resource documentation needs to be stressed in order to improve preparedness and response plans for any type of disaster. Fire and water, even in small amounts, can be a disaster from which recovery could be impossible without good documentation. At the same time, mitigation measures must take into consideration the historic values of places and not desecrate them through insensitively designed physical modifications. When temporary and interim installations for security are no longer effective against the intended risk, they should be removed and not become permanent fixtures of a property.

The final Principle addresses the need for disaster preparedness. Security measures should be planned in consultation with emergency organizations and other concerned parties, not undertaken in a vacuum. To the extent that risk and security information can be provided to public officials, local review boards, and citizens, it should be shared so that all members of the community can participate in defining the preparedness planning, mitigation, and disaster response appropriate for their heritage sites. Sharing these five principles can provide a basis for coordination among the many people involved in disaster preparation for a historic place and its neighborhood.

Conference Topics

Highlights of the conferences were accounts of the personal and direct experiences that speakers used to illustrate their decisions and recommendations. Among the public officials were several mayors who impressed upon the audience their central roles and command in times of disaster. Some admitted to learning "on the job" from disasters in their own communities. Bernadette Castro, the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation and Vice Chairman of the

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, spoke for all State Historic Preservation Officers and from her experience after the World Trade Center disaster. She emphasized the importance of the review process (under NHPA Sec. 106, NEPA, and applicable state and local regulations). She warned that in the urgency to protect and/or rebuild, reviews and consultation must not be sacrificed, but carried out promptly, effectively, and in coordination with other government activities. All the historic properties administered by New York State have emergency management plans that include documentation, recovery treatments, and location of emergency supplies, equipment, and telephone numbers.

Both conferences devoted considerable time to security in Washington, D.C., for the nation's most visible and symbolic historic places - the Capitol, the Mall, the White House and historic federal buildings and monuments. One of the greatest security challenges is the dilemma of balancing the public's safety with protection of historic places and their art, sculpture, records, and landscapes that are in the heart of the city and the destination for thousands of visitors every day. Presentations by the director of the National Capital Planning Commission, consultants, the National Park Service, and the Architect of the Capitol illustrated the difficulties of developing a holistic and coordinated program that provides security and maintains the open and accessible character that citizens and visitors expect in a democratic society. This was the challenge to the Interagency Task Force, which looked at both the monumental L'Enfant plan and the daily activities of workers, visitors, and residents. Working together, Task Force members have endorsed "a comprehensive urban design plan that would provide adequate security while at the same time enhancing the unique character of the Nation's Capital."[1]

Several sessions focused on specific techniques for integrating security elements into existing buildings. Besides increasing the perimeter around historic buildings and controlling access to grounds, there is a growing array of technical security options provided by alarm systems and monitoring devises. Blast analysis and studies of the impacts of trucks loaded with explosives are leading to many new products to protect windows and structural members of buildings without altering the historic appearance.[2] At Tweed Courthouse, the former County Courthouse in New York City, the first computer-modeled fire-safety plan for a significant historic public building was tailor made to channel smoke in the Courthouse to the central domed space. Technological advances, combined with operational changes such as moving functions off-site or to the perimeter, are being used at many places, including U.S. property in foreign countries.

The financial implications of disaster can be catastrophic for some properties and for the businesses located in them. Insurance companies like the Chubb Group are working with

[1] Information and copies of the Task Force's report and of subsequent plans are available from the National Capital Planning Commission, 401 9th St., NW, North Lobby, Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20576, phone 202-482-7200, web site: 222.ncpc.gov.

[2] The APT Bulletin in spring 2003 will be devoted to articles by conference speakers about many of the technical architectural and engineering aspects of security for historic places.

owners of historic properties to assess risk and find coverage. In addition to the work of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development helps local governments to use CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funds to develop disaster plans. The federal standard for assessing risk and evaluating associated costs is called "value engineering." Often used on large construction projects, the techniques of value engineering can be applied to any project where there are complex cost concerns. Costs, according to code expert, Mel Green, P.E., may also be a factor as the new international building codes, with increased security requirements, are applied to historic structures.

The conferences were successful in showing that more programs need to address the issues of security at historic places and, in the process, the values that these places hold for all of us. Increased awareness about these issues is critical. Perhaps in some security circles the viewpoint of one federal engineer that, as in Poland, historic places can always be rebuilt is the underlying reason for disinterest. More likely, we take for granted that we will have our historic "tourist" places, libraries, and art collections in tact and we cannot imagine life if they were lost. Unexpected disasters, such as the water main break at the Boston Public Library that flooded and damaged materials in the basement floor, should be a wake-up call for everyone. Even if there may be loss, as shown in the report Cataclysm and Challenge: Impact of September 11, 2001, on Our Nation's Cultural Heritage produced by Heritage Preservation, Inc., it can be reduced by pre-disaster planning. The concluding finding of the report was that, "Although the events of September 11 were caused by an unprecedented act of terror, we found that standard, proven emergency management plans and responses turned out to be the most effective way of dealing with the disaster.[3]

Since these conferences, concern about historic places in the development of security plans and disaster mitigation and recovery has been sporadic, at best. The American Society of Landscape Architects became active immediately after 9/11 in developing a Security Design Coalition, which wrote a set of principles for good security design. The American Institute of Architects has prepared materials on security, particularly in new building design and construction. A few engineers and architects have shown how security technologies can be placed unobtrusively in historic buildings. However, conferences on security design, infrastructure protection, and similar topics have made no mention of how new procedures and techniques can be integrated in such a manner that they do not reduce the accessibility – and the democratic symbolism - of our historic places. While security experts were willing to come to a "historic preservation" meeting, there is very little reciprocity.

Be Prepared!

Lessons learned from disasters emphasize the reliance on common sense, assessment of the values inherent in the property and collections, knowledge of technological advances, and coordination with neighbors and communities. Success stories occurred where property managers had invested funds in protecting the historic site. These managers had

[3] Copies of the report are available from Heritage Emergency National Task Force, 1625 K St., NW, Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20006, phone 202-634-1422 or email TaskForce@heritagepreservation.org.

also focused on the most likely threats: fire, smoke, water, and loss of electrical power (therefore, light, heat, air conditioning and hard-wired equipment). Whether the disaster was man-made or natural, the consequences always involved at least one of these factors and could involve structural collapses of shelves, floors, walls, and landscape features, such as sculptures, trees, walls, and roads.

As Christie McAvoy, an expert in developing disaster plans for historic places in Los Angeles, said, "learn from the Boy Scouts, be prepared!" From the disasters already experienced in Los Angeles, Sacramento, New York City, San Francisco, at the Pentagon, and in communities like Stockbridge, MA, and Warwick, RI, to be prepared means following some basic steps, among which are:

1. Identify and assess the risks to your historic property and to people and identify your security objectives and priorities.
2. Produce a Disaster Management Plan, coordinate it with your local disaster offices, including the fire department, and practice it! And, practice it when you have visitors, as well as staff, on the site.
3. Train managers and on-site staff to be first responders. No one knows who may have to take charge at the moment that a disaster happens. Bosses may be on vacation, staff may be at off-site events, security personnel may be overwhelmed.
4. Document your collections, archives, libraries, interior decorations, architectural and structural elements. Put a copy of that documentation off-site, but make sure it is accessible.
5. Investigate and implement technologies and experiences that save lives and protect historic properties for different types and lengths of threats.

At the conclusion of both conferences, John H. Stubbs, Vice President, World Monument Fund, put the discussions into historic and international perspective by showing us that willful acts against cultural properties have been by far the most destructive force. Through time, he noted, history is replete with examples of threats to historic structures as well as attempts to preserve or document endangered sites. Human beings have always found intrinsic value in places, shelters, and objects defined as cultural heritage. We have made efforts to protect those valued places from man-made disasters, such as wars and physical attacks, and from natural disasters, such as floods. Throughout history, surviving cultures have risen after disasters to rebuild those places that symbolize themselves. Heritage destruction is an integral part of war, and today heritage protection should be an integral part of homeland security. Stubbs concluded that heritage preservation faces new challenges undreamed of a few years ago. "Could it be," he asked, "that the next cycle in American preservation has been defined by the challenges posed to the country after September 11th?"

Sharing Information

As the Federal Preservation Institute develops its program to enhance the training and information available on historic preservation, we are looking for opportunities to bring the lessons learned at the conferences to help agencies and organizations that are stewards of our historic properties and collections. For the conferences, David W. Look,

AIA, National Park Service, prepared a bibliography of materials on all types of disasters, including earthquake, typhoon, terrorist attack, volcano, and war. FPI staff prepared a list of all Internet sites with information on security that would be helpful to historic property managers. This year we are exploring ways in which we can assist local communities as well as state and federal agencies in integrating protection and recovery strategies that will keep our historic places open and accessible as well as secure. We are exploring other ways in which we can facilitate the sharing of information on how to defend against both human loss and property damage at the nation's many historic places. There will always be a risk of some type of disaster; and, we must always seek ways to reduce its impact on the places that we value.

Sidebar or insert box

Principles for Development of Security Measures for Historic Places

1. Heritage protection is in the public interest.
2. Balancing public safety and heritage protection is an evolving field.
3. Accurate information about heritage resources is fundamental to effective preparedness plans.
4. Historic resource values should be preserved in remediation actions.
5. Consultation with others during planning and implementation is necessary and important.

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